The Fourth Church Pulpit

A Lenten Series: Love to the Loveless
That They Might Lovely Be

SIMON AND THE UNINVITED GUEST

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Scriptures: Colossians 3:12-17, Luke 7:36-50

". . . forgive each other: just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive."
Colossians 3:13

The most difficult thing of all may be to forgive. It may also be the most important thing we ever do.

The late Reinhold Niebuhr was a brilliant thinker whose theological speciality was focusing on the interface of Christian beliefs and the realities of life in the world. In a book on ethics he wrote: "The crown of Christian ethics is the doctrine of forgiveness. In it the whole genius of prophetic religion is expressed." (p. 201) And then, almost as an after thought he added, "Genuine forgiveness is not a frequent achievement in individual relationships." [*An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p. 211]

It is a major topic of theological and literary exploration. Howard Rice, who will lead a Lenten Workshop in three weeks, deals with confession, repentance and forgiveness in his fine little book on *Reformed Spirituality.* Professor Rice cites an incident in a Frederick Buechner novel on the topic. A wise and deeply spiritual woman is talking with a minister about another woman, a mutual friend, who is quite disturbed and distressed. The wise older woman urges the minister to help the other woman know about forgiveness. She says:

> "She doesn't know God forgives her. That's the only power you have - to tell her that. Not just that God forgives her poor little adultery. . . . Tell her God forgives her for being lonely and bored, for not being full of joy with a houseful of children... Tell her that she is forgiven because whether she knows it or not, that's what she wants more than anything else — what all of us want. What on earth do you think you were ordained for?" [*The Final Beast,* p. 115 - in Rice, p. 127]

Buechner, of course, is a minister with a professional interest in the topic, you might say. There has always been a cynical suspicion that ministers have a vested interest in people feeling guilty and turning to religion to alleviate their guilt. Not so for Anne Tyler who wrote a wonderful novel about forgiveness, *St. Maybe.* It's about a young man, Ian Bedloe, who lives with a sense of powerful guilt. Ian Bedloe thinks he is responsible for his brother's and his sister-in-law's deaths. He adored his older brother — but one time in an almost off-hand manner, revealed his suspicion that his brother's wife was being unfaithful. The brother gets drunk, smashes his car into a bridge abutment and dies. His wife, Ian's sister-in-law, tries to carry on, raising their two children, but she too dies, of an overdose. Ian carries the responsibility, the guilt, like a heavy weight.

One evening in the midst of his despair, he wanders into a store front church, the Church of the Second Chance. Anne Tyler's description is sensitive and wonderful; there are only 15 or 20 people in the congregation; the pulpit is a formica counter top, the room is shabby - bare fluorescent tubes, one of them blinking, gray metal folding chairs. The people are shabby, too. When Ian takes his seat it is time for the prayer. In this church the content of the prayer is provided by the people who stand up and ask the church to pray for their specific needs. One woman asks for prayers for a friend who is "down in her blood." Another woman requests prayers for herself — her son has been killed in Vietnam. When she tells how — and here Tyler mixes in a poignant way tragedy and comedy — the young man forgot to put his parachute on before he jumped, Ian can't stifle a laugh. The people look at him — he feels shame. Suddenly he's on his feet, speaking: "I used to be good," he said. "Or I used to be not bad, at least. Not evil. I just assumed I wasn't evil, but lately, I don't know what's happened. Everything I touch goes wrong. I didn't mean to laugh just now. I'm sorry I laughed. . . ." The others were watching him closely. He had the sense they were weighing his words: they were taking him seriously. . . .

"Pray for me to be good again," he told them. "Pray for me to be forgiven." [p. 115-119]

The New Testament is about people like that. It's really not about beliefs, ideas, theology. It's not about how to be a good person. It's really not about religion. It's about people and their needs and God's love, and how that love intersects with their needs in Jesus Christ. A hymn writer in the 17th century, Samuel Crossman, wrote words which have been set to John Ireland's haunting music, "My Song is Love Unknown."

"Love to the loveless — that they might lovely be" is the theme for a series of sermons this Lent . . . about people — people whose lives were touched by love: Lazarus who died too soon, a blind man, a woman who was outcast among her people and family, Nicodemus whose position necessitated coming to Jesus at night, and this morning, Simon the Pharisee and his uninvited dinner guest.

Jesus was the invited guest. It may have been a weekly event, a kind of brunch after Synagogue, to visit with and discuss the Rabbi's sermon; this week, a young itinerating teacher from Nazareth. It was a formal occasion. A long low table was set in the courtyard which opened onto the street. Passersby could look in and see who was at the table. If it looked interesting, it was not unusual for people to crowd in and watch and listen.

The food was in large bowls. The guests reclined, leaning on one elbow, feet away from the table. Sandals were left at the door. While they ate, servants poured water over their feet. The ritual was as normal and predictable as shaking hands with your guests when they arrive, taking their coats, showing them a seat and offering something to drink.

But in this case, there has been a significant and serious deviation in custom. The host, Simon the Pharisee, has not welcomed Jesus with the customary kiss of greeting. And Jesus has not been included as the servants poured water over the other guests feet, drying them with a towel. It was a visible snub — not unlike inviting a guest to dinner and ignoring him. People would have noticed.

Simon the Pharisee is not a bad man. In fact, he is a righteous man: he is very religious, obeys all the rules, keeps all the customs, is generous to the poor, gives alms, and is particularly fastidious about keeping clean and pure according to his religious regulations. Perhaps he wanted to put the young Rabbi in his place. Perhaps he wanted to express disagreement with the new ideas. Give him the benefit of the doubt and say he wanted a stimulating dinner conversation and because he was, in fact, so much more prominent and important than his guest, he simply forgot the greeting and overlooked the customary niceties.

So they are reclining at table — an interesting company — and in comes this woman. She may not be a prostitute, but there are indications. Simon knows her, knows who and what she is; she is a "sinner." And then there's the perfume, in a flask around her neck. And, of course, her appallingly inappropriate, presumptuous behavior.

She comes out of the crowd, without warning but one has the sense that she appears at about the time Simon's insolent rudeness has become apparent. And she empties the flask of perfume over his feet and lets down her hair — an act of intimate affection. The Talmud calls letting your hair down in front of anyone but your husband grounds for divorce. And then she dries his feet with her hair and kisses them.

The dinner guests and onlookers were stunned — speechless, uncomfortable and embarrassed for their host. Simon has a problem, and in a stage whisper — haruumphs . . . "Some preacher he is! If he was any kind of prophet he'd know what she is and not allow her to do that."

Jesus, in the meantime, apparently knows exactly what is going on, knows who the woman is, and knows Simon's discomfort and embarrassment. He tells a little story about a lender who forgave two debtors, and using the Socratic method, leads Simon to understand the enormity and the importance of forgiveness. And then comes the line the scholars have been discussing and arguing about ever since.

"Since she has been forgiven much, she loves much" . . . or did he say, "Since she loves me so much, I have forgiven her"? What comes first — love or forgiveness? Do you receive forgiveness as a result of being a good and loving person, being kind to your neighbors and confessing your sins? Or do you become a good and loving person because your are forgiven? Theologically, does repentance and confession produce forgiveness and reconciliation or does forgiveness, God's loving, graceful forgiveness, produce repentance, love, gratitude, in us?

I think it's the latter. I think that the uniqueness of the Christian Gospel, its most radical and revolutionary proposal, is that forgiveness comes first; love, repentance, confession, generosity, morality - is a response. I think that woman lived totally cut off from any sense of personal worth, any sense of beauty and value and goodness. I believe she had concluded that she was no good. Henri Nouwen says that it's "not easy to hear a word of love in a world filled with voices that shout, 'You are no good; you are ugly; you are worthless; you are despicable; you are nobody — unless you can demonstrate the opposite.'"
["Forgiveness: The Name of Love in a Wounded World," *Weavings*, March/April, 1992, p. 7]

We can't know for sure but I'm guessing that describes the woman. And the place she heard that she was bad, ugly and worthless — was religion. Maybe she heard it other places too. Maybe her parents were abusive and her family dysfunctional, and all her relationships destructive. But primarily where she heard the word about her own condition — her sin — her unacceptability to good people and to God, was from religion, and from religious people like Simon.

So when she heard there was a Rabbi from Nazareth saying that people like her were forgiven, were forgivable — were worthy of God's love and a Rabbi's attention, I think she was overwhelmed. When she heard about a Rabbi who spoke with authority about how broad and wide and deep was God's love and therefore God's family, a Rabbi who counted among his friends — with whom he ate and drank and laughed and talked — common fishermen and tax collectors and former prostitutes and healed lepers; when she heard I think she was overwhelmed, maybe even in love, and she did one of those wonderfully impetuous things love does — she said "I love you" about as eloquently as it has ever been said. And became, herself, lovely. . . .

"Love to the loveless shown that they might lovely be. . . ."

The truth is you can't love — can't love another person, can't love God, certainly can't love yourself, can't even love life much — if you feel rejected, unwanted, unloved. If the only word you hear is that you are unlovely, chances are good that's what you'll be. But if there's another word — a minority report: if somewhere in all the noises of life you hear a voice saying "I love you," you can't help but become lovely. And that's what the Gospel of Jesus Christ is about. That's what he was about that day at the dinner party . . . saying "I love you" and making lovely, therefore, a woman and a Pharisee.

I'm convinced Simon the Pharisee is at least fifty percent of the reason this story is in the Bible, maybe more. Jesus wants him because the truth is he doesn't know any more about love and loveliness than the woman, maybe a lot less. He, I think, is the one you and I need to pay attention to. Simon had it backwards. He thought religion was what he had to do to persuade God to love him, to make himself acceptable. He thought religion was what he did to earn enough goodness to make himself righteous. But according to Jesus, it's the other way around . . . forgiveness, then love.

Sometimes we get it backwards too. In our culture religion is viewed as the protector of morality, the definer of righteousness, the institution that gets to say who is righteous and who is not, what is good behavior and what is not. And so for many people the experience of religion is critical, judgmental, condemning, moralizing and punishing. For many, the bottom line in religion is guilt. And in a peculiar way, in a day when everybody is worried (for good reason) about family values, business ethics, morality in general, religion it seems, ought to know the difference between good and evil, morality and immorality and be clear not only about where it stands, but with whom it stands.

The trouble is that's exactly how Simon the Pharisee thought and he missed the point. He thought his religious duty was not only to avoid behavior like that woman but also to keep her and people like her at arms length. Even if she had repented, changed her life — which some scholars think she had — Simon was taking no chances.

Jesus wanted him to know that he was forgiven so that he could love and be lovely, too. But, as the story ends, it is too difficult for him. He doesn't get it. Jesus wanted Simon to forgive the woman, to accept her as she was.

That's difficult. Forgiveness means — not that I overlook your offenses; not I will forget the wrong you have done; not your sin is no consequence. Forgiveness means — I will not let what you have done interfere with our relationship. My love is stronger than your sin. In spite of what you have done, if you want to, we can start over again.

That's difficult. For one thing in interpersonal relationships, it isn't fair. That may be why Reinhold Niebuhr said forgiveness in interpersonal relationships is rare. "The logic of justice is all on the side of the offended person," Lewis Smedes says. [*How Can It Be All Right When Everything Is All Wrong?*, p. 44] "Why should I be the one to forgive? I'm the one who got hurt — he's the one who did it." What is it about us that keeps an active file of all our hurts, insults, offenses and the people who did them to us? What is that about? Henri Nouwen thinks it's an addiction — that we can actually get hooked on our resentment.

To forgive is to make a difficult but courageous and strong choice. It is to let go of the past, empty out the file drawers, unclench our fists and say, "I love you. Nothing you have done has changed that. We can start again."

You may need to do that with a spouse who has disappointed or betrayed you. You may need to do that with a friend who has insulted you; a brother or sister who has ignored you; a lover who has taken advantage of you; your children who take you for granted and have said something unfeeling and cruel. Many need to forgive parents long gone for what they did or didn't do, and parents still very much here. A career Army officer I met recently said the nation needs to forgive itself for Vietnam.

It is a very costly business. The cost is pride, ego; sometimes tears and pain and anger. It is no simple thing to forgive. It is a big deal to be forgiven.

How in the world can we do it? There is a sense in which none of us can on our own. There is, I think, only one way and that is to know that in an ultimate sense we have been forgiven. That before we ever asked, the one who created us forgave us, accepted us, loved us; that before we ever had a notion that we might need to be forgiven, there was grace working for us, love extended to us.

I don't think it happens much because it is such a radical idea that God loves us and wants to be our friend, and enjoys us, likes who we are, appreciates our gifts . . . and forgives us.

I think the only possible way to forgive is to know how costly God's love, God's forgiveness was; to see the cross, toward which this Lenten Season moves, as the sign somehow of God's holy love.

I think Professor Tillich was right: "Nothing greater can happen to a human being than that he is forgiven . . . suddenly we are grasped by the certainty that we are forgiven, and the fire of love begins to burn." [*The New Being*, p. 12]

"Love to the Loveless That They Might Lovely Be."

Amen.